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# SOME OBJECT LESSONS

AN ADDRESS

DELIVERED AT THE ANNUAL MEETING OF

## THE NATIONAL CIVIL SERVICE REFORM LEAGUE

AT BALTIMORE, MD.,

DECEMBER 10, 1903,

BY

HON. CARL SCHURZ.

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PUBLISHED FOR THE  
NATIONAL CIVIL SERVICE REFORM LEAGUE,  
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# Publications of the National Civil Service Reform League

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## Some Object Lessons.

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HON. CARL SCHURZ.

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PERMIT me a few remarks on some aspects of civil service reform which, indeed, are not new, but cannot too often be pressed upon public attention.

The reform of the civil service, as we advocate it, aims at two objects: To secure to the people an honest and efficient public service, and to eliminate, as much as possible, the demoralizing element of patronage and political and personal favoritism from out political life. The first is accomplished by subjecting candidates for public employment to examinations and probations testing their fitness for such employment; and the second by making such examinations competitive, so as to give the fittest man the best chance for appointment and to exclude appointment by favoritism, personal or political, and thus the use of the office concerned as party spoil. This is not a matter of abstract theory, but of simple practical common sense.

We do not pretend that civil service reform, if ever so successfully carried on, will prove a panacea for all the ills the body politic is heir to; that it will furnish a public service in point of efficiency and honesty absolutely perfect; or that it will entirely banish from public life corruption and the use of official power and opportunity for ends of private selfishness. But we do maintain that, so far as public employments have been subjected to civil service rules of this character, and so far as these rules have been enforced with faithful thoroughness, the public service has been greatly improved in point of efficiency, honesty, and general character. This is no longer a matter of conjecture, but of actual experience, recognized by every fair-minded man. Civil service reform has with signal success passed the period of uncertain trial. Every executive



officer is now compelled to admit—and the more conscientious he is, the more emphatically he will admit it—that those branches of the public service in which the civil service rules, and especially the competitive principle, are most strictly enforced, the work to be done is most attentively attended to and most satisfactorily performed. And although it has been asserted by the detractors of the merit system—and with an appearance of truth—that competitive examinations cannot test a candidate's integrity of character, many years's experience has proved beyond question that among the public servants who entered the service upon competitive examination, the number of cases of official dishonesty has been infinitesimally small compared with the number of such cases among those who obtained their places by mere political influence or favoritism.

We have in this respect just now a most instructive object-lesson. You have heard of the Bristow report on the scandals in the Post-Office Department, and of President Roosevelt's memorandum accompanying the publication of that report. If you have not read these documents, I advise you to do so without delay. You will find that the President did a most meritorious thing in ordering an investigation of certain branches of that department, in seeing to it that this investigation be thorough, and in publishing the results of it. You will also be struck with the fact that of all the public servants who were, in consequence of that investigation, indicted for fraud or other malfeasance, not one had come into the service by regular competitive examination. Only one had gone through a competition, not for entrance, but for promotion. All of them had originally obtained their appointments by political influence or personal favor. And it is to be noted as peculiarly significant that in several cases the positions to which they have been appointed, were excepted from the competitive rule on the ground so solemnly insisted upon by the patronage monger, that they were places of a confidential or fiduciary character requiring a peculiar degree of integrity and trustworthiness, of which no competitive examination could furnish

adequate proof, and the ascertainment of which must therefore be left to the enlightened discretion of the appointing officer—that is, to the recommendation of some influential politician. And of the persons who had to leave the service, either by resignation or removal, for some minor delinquency, only three had entered it through the portal of competition.

The reason for all this is simple. Men's motives of conduct are not seldom seriously affected by the circumstances under which they live. The person appointed to office under the old spoils system usually obtains his place as a reward for political service rendered or in expectation of some political service to be rendered. He knows that he has more or less powerful political influence behind him. As that influence put him into office, he relies upon that influence to keep him in office also, in case his conduct be not as good as it should be. And usually that reliance is not misplaced. I speak from personal experience. When I was Secretary of the Interior I never removed a clerk for inefficiency, or habitual drunkenness, or other misbehavior, without being rushed upon by one or more Congressmen, sometimes even United States Senators, who vociferously insisted that the delinquent must be restored to his place; and when I refused, which I always did, I was often violently denounced as an official who did not understand his business; and I was even now and then threatened with dire consequences. It requires only the plainest common sense to see that such a system is not likely to inspire the person so appointed to office with a keen sense of official responsibility. It will not incite him to do his best or to be scrupulously correct in his conduct. It will rather encourage the idea that he has been put in office to give him a comfortable berth, and that, if, in trying to make a good thing of it, he does something reprehensible, there will be influence behind him powerful enough to get him out of the scrape. It thus throws temptations into his way very dangerous to a character that is not fireproof. It is therefore not surprising that among the public servants so appointed there should be so many going astray to a more or less serious extent, as shown

by the recent report on frauds. But the real wonder is that, considering the seductive opportunities, there should be so few of them. For it must be admitted, that even under the spoils system of appointment a great many of the public servants have done their duty, as they understood it, and kept their integrity intact. But it must be kept in mind that—to the honor of human nature, be it said—they did this, not owing to the prevailing system, but in spite of its demoralizing influences.

Now, on the other hand, contemplate the situation of the public servant who has entered upon his place through the portal of the competitive examination. To begin with, he is proud of owing his success not to the favor of anybody, but to his own personal merit; and there is nothing that stimulates a healthy ambition more than just pride of achievement. There is no “influence” behind him to keep him in his place, and to protect him against punishment if he misconducts himself, or to help him higher up. His tenure of office, as well as his chance of advancement, depend in a well-regulated merit system entirely upon his deserving. He knows that he will not have what he has not fairly earned, that there is no impunity for his failings, and that he will stand and rise, or fall and sink, solely according to his merit.

There we have, then, between the two kinds of public servants, a difference of motive which only the blind cannot see. On the one side the public servant appointed and kept in office by favor and influence, tempted by his circumstances to do his worst; on the other side the public servant who owes his place and his chance of advancement to a competition of merit, stimulated by his circumstances to do his best. The report of the Post-Office Department scandals illustrates the result.

Another object-lesson has recently been furnished illustrating the effect of the spoils system upon the morality of legislative bodies—Congress in particular—and upon party action. The Bristow report gives us the picture of a Congressman from Georgia, a Democrat, Hon. Leonidas F. Livingston, who looked for a place, or rather a salary, for a friend of his, without running the risk of a



competitive examination. He hit upon the ingenious plan of having his man appointed a clerk in one of the small post-offices, at Conyers, in his State, where a competitive examination was not required. The postmaster at Conyers was willing. But the expense allowance for that small post-office was only \$100. This, however, did not discourage the Congressman, for he had a powerful friend in the Department, Mr. Beavers, who had charge of such matters, and who is now under indictment. Mr. Beavers, at the instance of the Congressman, had the allowance of the small post-office at Conyers raised from \$100 to \$820. The required salary for the friend of the Hon. Leonidas was thus obtained, and the clerk was appointed to draw \$720 a year. Of course, the clerk had nothing to do at Conyers except to draw his salary, which he faithfully did. He was then transferred to another office, thus circumventing the competitive rule, whereupon the allowance to the little post-office at Conyers was dropped again to the old figure, \$100. The clerk is probably still lodged in a comfortable berth somewhere, laughing at the circumvented civil service rules.

A similar case happened in the State of Maryland. The Hon. Albert A. Blakeney, one of your Republican members of Congress, wanted a salary for Miss Ethel W. Colvin, without exposing her to a competitive examination. He also hit upon a small post-office at Port Deposit, Maryland, the allowance of which was only \$60. This, of course, would not do. Then the Hon. Blakeney summoned Mr. Beavers to the rescue, who promptly raised the allowance of the little post office to \$500, on account of "increased business." But lo! the postmaster at Port Deposit was not found willing to co-operate in the corrupt deal. He positively refused to appoint Miss Colvin to an unjustifiable salary, and as poor Miss Colvin could not thus be provided for, the "increased business" vanished from view and the allowance to the little post-office was set back to the old figure of \$60. If such a thing were possible, the postmaster at Port Deposit should be promoted to a higher place for distinguished bravery in the presence of the enemy. But it is much more probable

that the Hon. Albert A. Blakeney, Republican member of Congress from Maryland, has found that postmaster an entirely unfit person for his place, who should be removed for incompetency.

The Bristow report mentions other cases of the same kind; but there are, no doubt, a great many similar ones not mentioned, and perhaps not yet discovered. Now, what does this mean? Here we see members of Congress, Republicans and Democrats—for spoils politics know no distinction of party—corruptly filching unnecessary and unjustifiable salaries from the public treasury to provide for some favorites, and doing this with the aid of a high officer of the Government, himself appointed by “influence” and thus a creature of the spoils system. And there we see that officer of the Government “obliging” members of Congress and “making friends” of them by carrying out the corrupt transactions, and that officer robbing the Government in his way for his own profit, and relying upon his friends in Congress to protect him in return against discovery and punishment. Mr. Beavers is reported to have said that he had Congress in the hollow of his hand; and I should not wonder if the report were true. At any rate, he and all the other malefactors in the Post-Office Department thought themselves similarly fortified, for according to the Bristow report they carried on their business of “getting rich quick” with a recklessness which can hardly be explained on any other than the theory that they expected their many obliged friends in Congress would prevent any investigation thorough enough to find them out for fear of being found out themselves. Indeed, there have been Congressional investigations of the Post-Office Department, by the Senate, as well as the House, but they always stopped short of the evil doers who, knowing too much, held Congress in the hollow of their hands. So much more credit is due to the executive who let light into the dark places.

Now it is to be hoped that the operation will not stop with the punishment of the culprits already discovered. In the first place all the patronage mongers in Congress who have seduced officers of the Government into crooked

dealings, should be exposed to public view. There are, it may be hoped, not many of them. But the efforts which are said to be making in Congress to withhold the whole of the papers connected with the Bristow investigation from public knowledge, after the notorious failure of Congressional investigations, create, as the matter now stands, a very general suspicion which the innocent ones should consider it a duty to themselves to dissipate as much as possible by exposing the guilty. It might in this case be in the public interest in some way to assure the indicted officers of immunity if they will tell all they know, no matter whom it may inculcate. Such a disclosure would serve to fortify many a shaky virtue for the future.

But of still greater value will it prove, if the system be wholly uprooted which made such scandals possible. Every crevice and cranny in the general civil service regulations which makes a circumvention of them in any way possible, should be most carefully closed up. President Roosevelt has stopped many of them, but perhaps not all. But more, every position under the government which by any possibility can be put under a competitive rule should be rescued from the reach of spoils politics. And above all things, an end should be made of the most baneful curse of all—the unconstitutional interference of Senators and Representatives with the responsible exercise of the executive power in making appointments—in other words the curse of the so-called Congressional patronage—a curse to the executive, a curse to the public service, and a curse to the Senators and Representatives themselves. Indeed, they will secretly admit it to be a curse to the very men who exercise it.

I know, indeed, how difficult it will be to do away completely with this abuse, which will be a prolific source of demoralization so long as it exists. But it can be greatly mitigated as to its effect by restricting the area of patronage to the narrowest possible limits. Thus, for instance, the appointment and tenure of fourth-class postmasters, of whom there are nearly 70,000, and whose nomination does not require the consent of the Senate, might be subjected to such civil service regulations as would relieve



them of the feudal lordship which is exercised over them by members of Congress. To what scandal that lordship gives birth we find illustrated in the Bristow report, as well as in the arbitrary removal of Huldah B. Todd in Delaware at the mere request of the Addicks Senator. Indeed, in this case, which has called forth so universal an expression of disgust, it is maintained by civil service reformers, among them one of the National Civil Service Commissioners, that the existing civil service rules actually did protect fourth-class postmasters against arbitrary dismissal for political reason. And I do not hesitate to say that by confirming and practically upholding this construction of the rules, and by so regulating the appointment of these postmasters as to withdraw them from Congressional patronage and influence, the President would, as to ultimate effect, do a greater service to the cause of reform than by all the other good things he has already done for it.

I cannot close without presenting to you another object-lesson strikingly illustrating the effect of the patronage and spoils system upon the morality of political parties. As you are aware, we had a municipal election in the City of New York a few weeks ago. The issue was whether the citizens of New York would continue the administration of Mayor Low, which on the whole has been a very good one—in fact the best we have had for many decades—or whether they would return to Tammany rule which, the world over, is reputed to be a government of graft and blackmail. There being ordinarily a large Democratic majority in New York, Tammany could be defeated only by a union of the Republicans with independent and anti-Tammany Democrats. The Republicans entered into this union of forces with apparent ardor, which was no doubt sincere with a great many of them. But somehow or other Tammany triumphed in the election, and it was noticed that in some strong Republican districts the Republican vote had greatly fallen off—whether enough or not, to give Tammany the victory it is unnecessary to inquire. The falling off was an unquestionable fact.

The leader, or rather the boss, of the Republican or-



ganization was Thomas C. Platt, a Senator of the United States. After the election he expressed his thoughts and feelings about the result in this characteristic fashion: "The November vote in New York is no surprise to me. The people did not want Low, and the Republican party gave to him quite as much support as he had any right to expect at its hands. Although (two years ago) it contributed over 75 per cent. of the vote that made him Mayor, he did not give the Republican organization three per cent. of the patronage. . . . I did not see Mayor Low once from the night of his nomination to the day of election. He never sent for me nor asked for my assistance. I supported him, but without hope of his election."

Now contemplate this spectacle. Here is the leader of a great party engaged in a most important contest. The character of the government, the welfare of the greatest city of the republic, one of the greatest cities of the world, is at stake. But this is nothing to him. All he thinks of is not the interest of three and a half millions of people, not the prosperity and good name of one of the world's most important emporiums of commerce and industry—what he thinks of is simply the spoils of office—patronage. And he actually does not blush to say so. The candidate representing the cause of good government in that contest has not given his organization more than three per cent. of that patronage. He does not assert that the appointments of the Mayor have been bad, injurious to the public welfare. He cannot assert this, for they are known to have been uncommonly good. But that is not what interests him. In his opinion not enough of the spoil of office has been given to his henchmen. The good government candidate has not even during the campaign "sent for him" to ask for the party-boss's assistance, and to bargain with him about his share of the spoil in case of victory. That was reason enough for the party-boss to give the cause of good government only so much support as its candidate "could expect," and to contemplate defeat with perfect equanimity. For what he cared, the great city and its important interests might go to Tammany unless he was assured of a good percentage of the spoil. Did you ever

hear of a more cynical confession? And the man who made this confession has for many years been the almost omnipotent leader of the Republican party in the State of New York, who ruled the Legislature according to his political interests, whose favor or disfavor made Republican politicians rise or fall, and who controlled the most important part of the Federal appointments in that State even under the present administration. He is said to be now succumbing to a new State-boss stronger than he.

We must at least thank him for having furnished us a most instructive object-lesson as to the effect the spoils system, the patronage-trade, is apt to exercise upon the leadership and the moral spirit of political parties—for the Hon. Thomas C. Platt is by no means the only potentate of his kind. There are others in other States fully as powerful and fully as vicious. There will be such in every State if the demoralizing influences which are bred and stimulated, among other causes, by the spoils system, are much longer permitted to corrupt and degrade political parties. The general, or even an extensive, use of the public offices and employments as party spoil cannot fail to make our party-contests, which should be only struggles for the prevalence of different principles and policies, in great-measure scrambles for public plunder; it is almost certain in the long run to make the most selfish and unscrupulous element in the party organization, which is usually the most alert and active, the most influential one, and then that leader of the party who succeeds in becoming the general distributor of the spoil, will, as paymaster, easily develop into the boss with a well-organized machine of spoils-fed henchmen behind him. The party leader will then be, not what he should be, a leader of opinion, but a mere captain of organization; the organization will be held together by what is picturesquely called “the cohesive power of public plunder,” and it will be controlled by the ever alert element of the habitual spoils hunters. This means the utter demoralization of party activity, making the party unfit to be an agency of good democratic government—in fact, making it a danger to democratic institutions.

This development becomes so threatening that it is the highest time to put a stop to it; and one of the things necessary to put a stop to it is the destruction of the patronage business by placing the public service out of the reach of spoils politics. This can be done by putting all—I say absolutely all—the public employments to which the civil service rules can, under the Constitution, be applied, under those rules; and this is to be supplemented by such action on the part of the Executive as will establish, concerning the offices beyond the reach of legislation, rules for his own guidance based upon the merit principle, which will altogether make an end of the usurpation of the appointing power by members of the legislature, and thus destroy the patronage. This may have a very radical sound; but deep-seated and far-reaching evils demand thorough-going remedies, and we must not indulge in any delusion about this: So long as public offices are a matter of patronage to any extent, so long will that patronage exercise a demoralizing influence and constitute a most serious danger to the working of our democratic institutions. I say this as one who has had much experience of public life, official as well as unofficial, and I have reached this conclusion as the result of long and careful observation without the slightest bias of partisanship or pride of opinion.

What I have said of our National Government applies, of course, no less to the governments of our States and of our municipalities—especially those of our large cities in which spoils-politics have already wrought uncalculable mischief and threaten to work more. Indeed the governments of our large cities have become a matter of national concern, and no man can call himself a consistent friend of good government in general and a faithful defender of the Nation's welfare and good name, who would not apply the same rule that he thinks good for a department official or revenue clerk, also to our police officers, firemen and school-teachers. He who condemns the evils of the spoils system in the National Government and condones them in the home politics, which most nearly touch the



people, will have no reason to complain if his sincerity is suspected and he is called a sham reformer.

I am aware of the objection to all this : that democratic government is necessarily government through political parties; that without the spoils of office as rewards of party service, political parties cannot be held together; and that, therefore, the abolition of the patronage would strike at the vitality of democratic government. This is a fallacy, conclusively proved to be such by our own history as well as by the existence of political parties without patronage in other countries. At the beginning of our own Federal Government there was no distribution of offices as party patronage, and yet there were political parties according to the difference of opinion on principles and politics. And those parties were very spirited and active. In England there was once political patronage in our sense, and it brought forth the characteristic crop of profligacy and corruption to an alarming degree. The patronage was thoroughly abolished and has not existed there for a considerable period. But there are political parties as before, only far purer in morals and more public-spirited in their activity. In Germany there are political parties without the slightest vestige of party patronage. Who will dare to say that only the citizens of this great republic have become so depraved as to be incapable of forming and maintaining political parties without being paid for it with the spoil of office? The man asserting so outrageous a thing should be denounced as a wicked slanderer of his country and people. Evidently there will be political parties after the abolition of the patronage, but they will indeed be different from the parties we have now. They will no longer be held together by "the cohesive power of public plunder," but by the cohesive power of certain principles and policies, which their members hold in common, and for the prevalence of which they will together exert themselves. There will be party leaders, but they will be leaders of opinion, not mere captains and paymasters of organization. As to that matter of leadership, I am indeed not sanguine enough to expect that our model boss, Senator Thomas C. Platt, will, by the abolition of the patronage,



be made a public-spirited and statesmanlike party chief. It is much more probable that he will not be a party chief at all. He and his kind will have to go out of the boss-business, for, there being no more spoil to distribute, they will have nothing more to do. Nor do I think that thereby the public good will suffer any loss. Their places will be taken by men who have something valuable to say concerning the public interest and who care for it.

I do not predict that the abolition of the patronage will give us absolutely ideal parties and ideal leadership. But it will relieve our political parties of one of their most serious defects, and bring them much nearer to the standard of what they should be. Neither do I think, as I have already said, that civil service reform, be it ever so thorough, will cure all the ailments of the body politic, for there are evils other than the spoils system, which seriously threaten our democratic institutions. But I do believe that civil service reform, by destroying the patronage and thus eliminating from political life one of those active elements of sordid selfishness, which divert political parties from their true functions, will render those parties much more fit to deal with other important problems, and thereby greatly facilitate their successful solution.

While not indulging in the delusion that all the difficulties and obstacles standing in our way will yield at once, or that we can clear them at one great jump, we have good reason to be encouraged in our efforts gradually to overcome them. Civil service reform is happily not a partisan affair. It is neither Republican nor Democratic in a party sense. On each side of the dividing line it has its friends as well as its adversaries. Each party has at times declared itself emphatically in its favor, and certain elements in each party have sedulously co-operated with similar elements in the other party to nullify those declarations. In spite of their incessant and wily manoeuvres we have steadily gained ground, now more slowly and then more rapidly.

The progress of our cause has sometimes received a powerful impulse from events which startled the popular conscience. We are in the presence of such an event now.

The corruption and rottenness recently revealed as having long existed in some parts of our Government machinery, and frankly denounced by the President himself in his message, are sufficiently alarming to shake the many well-meaning people who so far have put aside our appeals with apathetic unconcern, out of their indifference. The most confirmed optimists can now hardly fail to open their eyes to the fact that, in the description of existing abuses and evil tendencies, we have rather understated than overcolored the truth, and that those abuses and evil tendencies, unless counteracted by thorough reforms, are certain to produce still greater mischief and shame. We can now confidently call upon all friends of good government in the Republic, at least to inquire into and study the measures we advocate, with open minds. It would be strange, indeed, if the shocking object-lessons staring us in the face to-day did not quicken the pace of our advance.

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